

Sappho rises from the ashes

Armand D'Angour

*The isles of Greece! the isles of Greece
Where burning Sappho loved and sung...*

So wrote Byron in 1819. In recalling ancient Greece, the Romantic poet's thoughts turn immediately to antiquity's adored love-poet, Sappho. 'Sung' (line 2) rather than 'sang' sounds odd to us; but Sappho, composing songs around 600 B.C. on the island of Lesbos, also used many strange forms in her Lesbian Greek dialect. What we can read of her poems are mostly fragments, many of which illustrate intense passion. One of the most famous fragments, no. 31— also known as *phainetai moi* (its opening words in the Greek) — survives only because part of it was quoted admiringly six centuries later by a literary critic, Longinus. But what makes this fragment so special? Here Armand D'Angour explains the beauty of Sappho's poem by exploring its emotional intensity, rhythm, and music, before suggesting how the original might have ended.

Burning with desire

In the four complete stanzas of fragment 31, Sappho describes her reaction as she watches a young woman enjoying a carefree exchange with a man whom some suppose is her fiancé:

*He seems just like the gods in heaven,
that man who sits across from you
and bends his head to listen to
your lovely voice
and charming laugh – which sets my heart
a-flutter in my breast, for when
I catch the merest glimpse of you,
my voice is gone,
my tongue's congealed, a subtle fire
runs flickering beneath my frame,
my eyes see blank, a buzzing noise
assails my ears,
my sweat runs cold, my body's gripped
by shivers, my skin's sallow
than grass, it seems as if I'm just
an inch from death...*

'Burning Sappho' indeed. However, only a few words into the fifth stanza, the poem suddenly breaks off: '*But all is worth the risk...and serf*'. The fragmentary nature of Sappho's poetry is, for some, part of its enigmatic beauty; others want to know how *phainetai moi* ended. Why is 'all worth the risk'? Perhaps because Sappho knew that though rejection makes one feel like

dying, one can live to love again – a point to which we shall return below. What is important to note for now is the intensity of her passion.

As in fragment 31, the objects of Sappho's love were almost all young women; indeed, so powerful were the feelings of attraction she describes that the word lesbian – the most common word to describe female homosexuality – has derived from her. However, it did not have that connotation in antiquity, and indeed other fragments speak of Sappho's passion for both sexes. What mattered to readers, then, was her emotional range and the beauty of her poetry.

Singing of love

Byron rightly spoke of Sappho's words being 'sung'. Her poems are in 'lyric' metres, simple repetitive rhythms, and just like a musician today accompanying herself on a guitar, Sappho would have sung while plucking lyre strings in time to the words. But what did it sound like to hear Sappho sing?

The rhythms of her songs can be reconstructed from the long and short syllables of Greek words. These give us the time patterns for the most familiar four-line 'Sapphic stanza': three of the same pattern, followed by a shorter fourth. We can represent them rhythmically as follows, using 'dum' for a long syllable and 'di' for a short one of half the duration:

Lines 1–3: *dum-di-dum dum | dum-di-di dum-di-dum dum*

Line 4: *dum-di-di dum dum.*

An English version such as this can give a sense of the metre:

*Who can aim to capture the voice of Sappho?
Unsurpassed, she sings of a world of heartbreak:
Lengths of artful verse cannot hope to match her
glorious music.*

The melody was transmitted orally and not written down, so it is lost. But ancient accounts and documents give us clues about how it sounded. A feature of ancient Greek is that it was a melodically inflected language: the pitch of the voice went up and down on different syllables. This is preserved by the accent-marks we see placed over vowels of Greek words. So in the word for 'lovely', *kalós*, the voice rose on the second syllable by an interval, we're told, of up to a musical fifth. It makes sense that when set to music the melody generally followed the natural pitch-rise on that syllable; and documents with ancient musical notation confirm this expectation.

In the Lesbian dialect, however, pitched syllables sometimes fell in different places from other common dialects. So Sappho sang *kálos* with a high note on the first syllable, rather than *kalós*. Furthermore, her dialect calls Priam of Troy *Peramos* of Wilion, Helen is *Helenā* not *Helenē*, her lyre is called a *barmos* in Lesbian Greek rather than *barbitos*, and so on. Along with the passion of her words, these linguistic and tonal differences may have sounded rather exotic, particularly for those brought up speaking the Attic dialect of the fifth century B.C. (as used, for instance, in Athenian prose and oratory).

Hearing the music

'Teach me that song of Sappho, so that I may learn it and die!'

So exclaimed Solon, an Athenian politician and poet who was roughly contemporary with Sappho, after hearing his nephew performing one of Sappho's songs. Why did Solon feel such sublime rapture? From what we have seen so far, we can imagine that her powers of expression and the enchanting dialect in which it was written would have contributed much to the experience of listening to Sappho's poetry. But Sappho was also said to have favoured tuning her 7-stringed lyre to a set of notes called the 'Mixolydian mode' which produced a moving and mournful effect. Ancient sources record the intervals of the scale, which, in modern terms, made the song sound as if it was in a high-pitched minor key, while the occasional rise and fall of an augmented fourth in the higher register gave the effect of intermittent sobs.

We don't know whether the Romans of the late Republic, centuries after Sappho lived, were able to hear her songs still being sung. But they admired her poetry, and in the first century B.C. Catullus translated most of fragment 31 into Latin (his poem 51); in doing so, he used the Sapphic metre and followed the sense faithfully for the first three stanzas. What is important to note, however, is that Catullus 51 was more of a version than a translation, since the Roman poet used the Sapphic model for his own purposes: that is, to hint at his feelings for another man's wife, the woman he calls by the pseudonym 'Lesbia' (which is clearly intended to allude in some way to the famous poet of Lesbos). But in his fourth and last stanza he breaks off and addresses himself in exasperation: 'Your problem, Catullus, is that you have too much idle time (*otium*) on your hands! Idle time makes you restless, and idle time also once destroyed kings and flourishing cities'.

Readers have long assumed that Catullus' last stanza has nothing to do with what Sappho sang. But is there a chance this version can tell us something more about the original upon which it was based? And, if so, how might we reconstruct the rest of fragment 31? To return to the question with which we started: why is 'all worth the risk'?

Reconstructing fragment 31

To begin with, the comment about 'kings and flourishing cities' sounds like a reference to the Trojan War. Since Troy's fall originated with Paris's love for Helen instigated by the goddess Aphrodite, Sappho herself might well have said that 'Love and Aphrodite' (rather than 'idle time') caused Troy's downfall. In response, however, Catullus insisted that his downfall was idle time, and that this *also* led to the Trojan War. How? Catullus gives the answer in another poem, where

he speaks of Paris enjoying 'idle times' (*otia* 68.104) with Helen, which so angered the Greeks that they formed the expedition to sack Troy.

Older books wrongly translate the words after the fourth stanza of Sappho's fragment 31 'But all must be endured'... This would imply resignation on Sappho's part. But the correct translation 'But all is worth the risk' sounds like the start of a much more defiant continuation. It suggests that Sappho went on to show why the struggle of love, though painful, is worth undertaking. Coming at the end of four stanzas listing the painful symptoms of love, that 'but' surely requires at least a few more stanzas to balance the shape of the poem. It's worth asking what such stanzas might have said.

Sappho defiant

Why, first, might suffering for love be 'worth it'? Only because such sufferers sometimes succeed. Since Sappho often refers to Homeric precedents to make her point, perhaps here she was put in mind of Menelaus, Helen's legitimate husband. He was an honourable hero who fought and nearly died to regain his lost love; in another poem (fragment 16) Sappho calls Menelaus 'the best of husbands'. His example would be proof for Sappho that suffering and fighting for love could, in the end, be worth it. In the words of a much later Latin poem, Love's Vigil, 'those who've never loved will love tomorrow, and those who've loved before will tomorrow love again'.

In 2004 and 2013 two substantial new fragments of Sappho's poems came to light, peeled from the papier mâché layers of Egyptian mummy casings. They caused huge excitement in the scholarly world, and confirmed typical elements found in Sappho's poems. These included her tendency to insert generalisations and mythical examples, to appeal to divinity, and to end poems by reflecting on her own situation. If these elements were applied in this case, they might suggest that Sappho worked, in this poem, towards a final stanza in which she appealed to the love-goddess Aphrodite (as she does in another poem, fragment 1) to help her chances in love.

If we read Catullus' *otium* stanza back into poem 31, and add the image of a Menelaus successful in regaining love, the continuation provides the poetic and emotional equilibrium required by the poem and typical of the poet. My own speculative reconstruction would go something like the following four verses. They allow Sappho not to burn for ever but to rise from the ashes of searing torment, no longer resigned and half-dead but newly defiant and hopeful:

But all is worth the risk since,

Left: Terracotta relief plaque ('Melian relief') c. 480–60 B.C.: a man with a female lyre-player; he grasps the lyre (barbiton) as though demanding her attention. Perhaps a depiction of Sappho rejecting the amorous advances of fellow lyric poet Alcaeus of Mytilene. © Trustees of the British Museum.

*Love,
you crush, impartial, lord and
serf:
You once of old laid low great
kings
and cities fine,
crushed holy Troy for Helen's
sake,
and slew Achilles and the Greeks.
But Menelaus – he won back
his lovely wife!
He left the bloody streets of Troy
and homeward made his sweet
return,
and laid his golden head to rest
on Helen's lap.
O Goddess, let me love again!
Dispel the struggle and the strife,
so that my hurt and pain will
prove
of no account.*

Armand D'Angour teaches Classics at Oxford, and his book The Greeks and the New was published in 2011. Formerly a professional cellist, he has since started research into ancient Greek music. In 2015 he advised on a reconstruction of Sappho's music for BBC 4, which is still available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02qpz87>

The full scholarly argument for the reconstruction de-scribed here, together with a translation into Lesbian Greek Sapphics and further references, may be found in: 'Love's Battlefield: Rethinking Sappho fr. 31' in Erôs in Ancient Greece, eds. E. Sanders, C. Thumiger, C. Carey, and N. Lowe (Oxford 2013), 59–71. A concise version with Greek texts can be accessed on the Web at <http://www.armand-dangour.com/sensational-sappho>.